“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.”

In the book of Galatians, St. Paul has firmly declared the doctrine of salvation by faith in Christ Jesus and sanctification of believers by the Spirit of Jesus. The Galatian believers had received the gospel through St. Paul’s preaching, and witnessed the power of God through their changed lives and the miraculous signs that accompanied Paul’s ministry. But after a time, certain teachers from Jerusalem came and preached to the Galatians another gospel, insisting that without circumcision and the rituals of Jewish law, the Galatian Gentiles could not share in the inheritance with God’s chosen people. Although the Galatians had received God’s wonderful grace through faith in the gospel, their weak consciences and sinful human reason made them fearful to trust in God’s grace to the end. They turned aside from their struggle to live by faith, and sought to please men and God through obedience to the law and to the standards of the world. As a result, the Galatians lost their joy in Jesus. They also lost their love for one another. For such a wicked influence on the Galatian sheep, Paul calls down curses on those false teachers, even if they appeared to be angels of God. St. Paul’s concern was not a selfish or political one. Instead, he saw that God’s precious sheep in Galatia were about to throw away God’s gift of the grace of forgiveness through faith in Jesus for the sake of rules and regulations that had no value, now that Christ had come. St. Paul was angry that those who called themselves shepherds and apostles had no thought for the well-being of God’s sheep, but were only concerned with their own status and pride. For this reason, Paul wrestles with the Galatians in their Bible study, until they might recognize that they are children of God by faith, and as children of God, they have the Spirit of his Son at work in them, preparing them to do his work here on earth, and to receive their inheritance in the kingdom of God.

In last week’s passage, we learned how God made slaves and slave-like people into his children and heirs of his kingdom by faith in Jesus. Those who only knew condemnation and divine discipline under law could suddenly call on God through faith as their loving Abba, Father, by the Spirit of Jesus in them. We praise God that we have the privilege to call on God as his children, and know that he will answer not as our Judge, but as our Abba, Father. In today’s passage, Paul teaches us that not only our salvation, but also our sanctification as God’s children can only be by faith through the Holy Spirit. The freedom we have in Jesus is a special privilege and responsibility, just as the heir is given freedom so that he might properly steward his inheritance. But just as human heirs are notorious for misusing their inheritance, like the prodigal son, so sinful human beings are in great danger of misusing their freedom in Christ. Therefore, we are tempted to turn again to the law as a restraint for our sinful nature. But, Paul declares, the law is as harmful in restraining our sinful nature after salvation as it was to our consciences before we were saved. The only way that we can live up to the law, summed up as: “Love your neighbor as yourself,” is to live by the Spirit. May God bless us through today’s message to believe the promise of God and bear the fruits of the Spirit through our faith.

First, Christ set us free (1). Let’s read verse 1 together. “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.” Paul concludes his teaching about our sonship through faith in God with this glorious declaration, “Christ has set us free.” Perhaps there is no word more honored and feared in human existence than this single word, “freedom.” Ever since the Lord gave the man and woman the freedom of choice in the garden of Eden, freedom has been recognized as God’s greatest gift to human beings. As God’s creatures made in the image of God, we cannot be happy unless we can enjoy the freedom God gave to us from the beginning. But when the man and the woman in the garden were given their freedom, they did not use their freedom well. They disobeyed God’s holy command and ate from the tree bearing the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil. As a result, they were
kicked out of the garden, and were cursed to live under law, the law of sin and death. Later, God gave the Jews the law of Moses. But not even Moses’ law could give them life, or their freedom as God’s children. Moses told the elders before his death, “For I know that after my death you are sure to become utterly corrupt and to turn from the way I have commanded you” (Dt. 31:29a). Although the law was a curse upon sinful man, there was no escape because mankind could not bear the blessing of God’s freedom. Numerous people have given their lives to obtain freedom for themselves and their people. But even more lives have been sacrificed to suppress freedom so that civil societies could be maintained.

When God’s time had fully come, God sent his Son to ransom people from the curse of the law. All those who believe in the Son are received by the Father as his children, and are declared to be servants and heirs of God’s kingdom. Truly, Christians are free people in God. We are heirs in God’s work, who have an eternal share in the harvest that is to come. We are not slaves of anyone, laboring hard to line another person’s pockets with wealth. We are employee-owners in God’s family, like the stock boys and check-out girls at Hy-Vee. But our inheritance is far better than theirs, for ours is by faith in God’s promise, and no one can take it from us. Satan, however, is jealous of our freedom in Christ. He comes through his servants to steal our precious freedom and make us slaves again. Satan has many ways of attacking God’s children to make them stumble and fall. But Paul in this chapter addresses Satan’s two-pronged attack on the children of God, and how we must stand firm in our faith to keep our freedom, and our inheritance, in God. Let’s read verse 1 together again. “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.”

Second, righteousness that is by faith (2-6). There is a saying, “Don’t put all your eggs in a single basket.” To do so means risking everything you have. The Galatians subscribed to this idea. They were like modern Hindus, who say that “Christ is good. Buddha is good. Krishna is good.” In particular, the Galatians wanted to have Christ, and to subscribe to the law, just in case, as a back-up plan. What does Paul think of their plan? Look at verses 2-4. “Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.” The flaw in the plan of the Galatians is very obvious. The law is one, just as God is one. If we subject ourselves to the law, hoping in our own righteousness on one point of the law, for example, circumcision, then we are obligated to meet the requirements of the law at all points, for God, who made the law on circumcision, also made the law regarding the eating of blood, the cycle of feasts, the forgiving of debts every seven years, etc. A man who never cheats on his wife and pays all his taxes but has killed 10 people will certainly not be regarded as righteous by men, nor by God. One young Christian made a decision to obey the Sabbath law by never working past 12 midnight on Saturday till 12 AM Sunday. Then, he thought it better to not work from dark on Saturday to dark on Sunday. Then he tried to do one or the other. Finally, he had to give up. Paul did his best to obey the law in every way. But what was his testimony? “We who are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Christ Jesus” (Gal 2:15,16a). Martin Luther testified in the same way regarding the rigorous life of a monk. It made him skinny and look strange, but it did nothing to ease or soothe his wounded conscience. Only faith in Jesus gave peace to his troubled soul.

What is worse about the Galatians half-faith, is that they had become alienated from Christ. When the Galatians had first believed, they acknowledged that Jesus had died for their sins. They were baptized into his name, and put their hope in his righteousness that they might be able to stand when Jesus comes again. Therefore, their flirtation with the law was not innocent at all. Rather, by turning to the law, they were rejecting faith. They were declaring Christ’s death to be of no value, and so their faith in him was not faith at all. When we turn to the law, and seek to depend on our own righteousness, we are driving Christ from our hearts, and with him, his Spirit of sonship. We become slaves again to the law, and fully accountable to God for our sins, as though we had never believed.
The Galatians attempted to make such a tragic compromise because of their weak consciences. They knew they were not righteous, although they had believed. So they turned to the deceptive rigor of the law, unwittingly rejecting what was already theirs by faith. Look at verses 5-6. “But by faith we eagerly await through the Spirit the righteousness for which we hope. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.” To have something by faith is the same as having it, because our faith is in the word of God, which cannot be changed. We have been promised a new life and an eternal inheritance in Jesus. We have been promised a righteousness that is by faith in Jesus. In Matthew 5:6 Jesus says, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.” We do not yet have it, but it is ours, more surely even than the money we have in the bank. To live by faith is to live with this confidence. Those who have this confidence are free indeed to grow in the image of Jesus, to love our brothers by faith in Jesus, to carry out the world salvation work of God by sharing the love of Jesus with the whole world. Let’s read verse 6 again. “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.” Our faith seems so weak against the powers and authorities of the world. But our faith is in Christ, whom God raised from the dead. As God raised Christ Jesus, so he will bless and raise all those who have lived by faith in him, from first to last. Therefore, let us love others with this confidence, even as Christ Jesus loved us.

Third, bearing the offense of the cross (7-12). In this part, Paul reveals the false motives and bad influence of the teachers who had been promoting circumcision. In particular, Paul accuses these teachers of seeking to “abolish the offense of the cross.” The cross is the symbol of shame and terrible suffering. But for Christians, the cross is the way in which God took away our slavery and gave us freedom as his children. Therefore, Christians should not be ashamed of the cross or what the cross represents. But these false teachers taught circumcision and observance of the law for the sake of making peace with nationalistic Jews. Paul himself had ruthlessly pursued Christians in order to make them submit again to Jewish law and deny the cross of Jesus. But Paul knew that he believed not because someone had softened the message of the cross. Rather, he could be saved when Jesus nailed his passions and pride to the cross through his one word to Paul, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting” (Acts 9:5). The cross offends our pride and self-righteousness. The cross frightens our sinful nature. But the cross of Jesus is the power of God to condemn the sinful nature, while showing mercy to all men. These false teachers claimed that they wanted the Galatians to live self-controlled, lawful lives. But in fact, their true motive in turning to circumcision was to avoid the offense of the cross which made their self-righteousness useless. Look at verse 11. “Brothers, if I am still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case, the offense of the cross has been abolished.” Paul bore up under trials and persecutions. It was so that God’s children might not depend on themselves and remain under slavery, but come to Jesus and to his cross, where they could be set free. We must watch out for teachers who avoid the offense of the cross. They and their followers will only be cut off from God and God’s history (12).

Fourth, the law of love (13-15). The problem of legalists and self-righteous people is not the law itself, but rather that, in their legalism, they miss the whole point of the law in their efforts to justify themselves. As Christians who have been set free and made heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, what can we learn from the law? When the law is summed up, the law teaches us: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” (14). Look at verses 13 and 14. “You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. The entire law is summed up in a single command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” In order to maintain our inheritance and our position as God’s children, we must practice the law of love by serving one another in love. If we don’t, and serve our sinful nature instead, we will only devour one another and be destroyed (15).

Fifth, life by the Spirit (16-26). Here, St. Paul addresses the other prong of Satan’s attack on Christians. Satan deceives Christians through their pride that since it is impossible to live up to the law, and that
election is God’s one-sided grace, we are free to serve our sinful nature and claim that God’s grace is only magnified by our incorrigible sins. But this is an even greater rebellion against God than legalism. Look at verses 19 - 21. “But the acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.” We must not mistake our freedom in God with human freedom. Our freedom in God is the right to keep what we have earned by laboring as God’s harvest workers in this dark and sinful world. This right is God’s one-sided grace to sinners who should long ago have been fired or sent to jail. Human freedom is to spit on this grace, and leave the harvest field for temporary glory or gain. Human freedom is not freedom at all, but slavery to our sinful nature. There will be no payment for those who live like this, but only a massive debt which they cannot pay.

Satan’s attacks are too serious and difficult to overcome by ourselves. How can we maintain the precious freedom we have been given in God? Look at verse 16. “So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.” There is only one way for sinful human beings to overcome the desires of the sinful nature, and practice the law of love. We must submit to the Spirit. We must welcome the Spirit into our hearts, and let him lead us (18). When we were under law, we were miserable, slaves of the sin we could not satisfy nor get rid of. When we were under the sinful nature, we were hungry and thirsty for righteousness, but nothing could satisfy. But what is the result for the one who lives by the Spirit? Look at verses 22 and 23. “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.” Salvation by faith in Jesus is an amazing gift from God. But God’s gift does not stop there. God gives us the Spirit of Jesus, who lives in us and makes us a new creation. As long as he lives in us, he bears the fruit that pleases God, and makes our lives acceptable to God. We can have peace that surpasses all understanding when he is present to assure our consciences that we are the children of God. We can have joy and love, as we share our assurance with all those around us.

How can we keep the Spirit near to our hearts and bear good fruit? We must repent and believe in Jesus, daily. Look at verse 24. “Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified their sinful nature with its passions and pride.” Some people say that to believe in Jesus is too easy. Such people have never believed in Jesus. Paul compares believing in Jesus to the pain of being crucified. St. Peter thought that he loved Jesus. So he boasted, “even if all fall away on account of you, I never will” (Mt. 26:33). But on the night Jesus was arrested, Peter denied Jesus three times to a little girl. In the morning, Jesus looked at Peter from a distance while the rooster crowed three times. Then Peter broke down, crying. His human loyalty was all he had. Still, it was not enough. So Peter cried at his utter helplessness to love Jesus like Jesus loved him. At that moment, Peter came to believe that Jesus was his one true Savior. His personal confession is found in 1 Pe 2:24. “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.” When Peter believed in Jesus, all his own efforts were proved useless by the cross. Paul himself was so ambitious to serve God. But he declared in Philippians 3:8, “I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things.” There is pain in giving up what we once considered most important. But there is a greater gain by far when we do so for Christ Jesus. May God bless you to bear the fruit of the Spirit by faith, from first to last.

In this passage, we learned that to believe in Jesus Christ is everything, for it is by faith in Christ that sinners can become heirs of God in the kingdom of God. May God bless you to let your passions and pride be crucified at the cross of Christ, so that you may have a new and eternal life in the Spirit.